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US Policy and Democratisation in Africa: the Limits of Liberal Universalism

by TODD J. MOSS*

WITHOUT the overriding concern of Soviet domination, Americans are engaging in an introspective re-evaluation of their national interests, values, and priorities. Despite the heterogeneity of all the participants, including the key opinion-makers, a near-consensus has emerged that the United States should be pushing and supporting an external process that has come to be known as ‘democratisation’. This policy stems from widespread perceptions about the special nature of America’s identity and rôle in the world. The thesis presented here is that the United States is primarily defined by a particular liberal philosophy and concept of modernity, and that the projection of ‘democracy’ abroad is not necessarily a ‘natural’ or universal evolution of human development. Africa’s increasing marginalisation has allowed certain groups committed to spreading ‘American values’ an unprecedented ability to shape policy and turn the continent into a liberal socio-political experiment.

AMERICAN IDENTITY AND FOREIGN POLICY

The United States is unique in the world because of its distinct demography, history, and place in the evolution of modern western culture. First of all, it is a massive conglomeration of diverse peoples, ways of life, and perspectives. It is a nation of immigrants, which gives it a dynamic and ever-changing population. As Earnest May has recently claimed, ‘Even now, many Americans think of the United States less as a nation than as a kind of alliance’.¹ Secondly, as

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¹ Earnest May, ‘Who Are We?’, in *Foreign Affairs* (New York), 72, 2, March–April 1994, p. 135.

explained by George Weigel, 'unlike other nations, whose roots lie in the soil of tribe, race, ethnicity, or language, [here] is a country whose casements rest on an idea...Jefferson's "all men are created equal"'.² Secretary of State Warren Christopher reiterated this point at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights: 'America's identity as a nation derives from our dedication to the proposition "that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights"'.³

Despite current and historical realities that contradict Jefferson, America is a nation where the glue that binds is found in a particular liberal philosophy, heavily influenced by John Locke. The dominant features of this political culture are strong beliefs in capitalism, individual freedoms, and human progress. Americans have accepted these concepts, which they hold to be 'self evident', as universal truths. In fact, 'Lockean liberalism has become so embedded in American life that Americans may be blind to what is really, namely, ideology'.⁴ Evidence of this are repeated statements that liberalism, democracy, and capitalism are really 'non-ideological'.⁵ These ideas have evolved into an American belief in representing universal human aspirations – i.e. 'life, liberty, pursuit of happiness'. Such a history and national conviction separates the US from other nation-states. This unique sense of self is what Weigel calls a 'morally based nationalism'.⁶

The political culture of the United States is also pervaded by 'an innate American optimism about the human condition and a view that even complex international problems would eventually prove amenable to rational solutions'.⁷ The secular language of rationality is often combined with biblical images of a battle with evil. From the early Calvinists to Woodrow Wilson to Ronald Reagan's 'evil empire', the United States has framed its ideology in terms of America as the saviour nation. Foreign policy debates have taken this for granted, and focus on how best to slay the dragon – to intervene actively or lead only by example?

How have American perceptions of their nation affected foreign

² George Weigel, *American Interests, American Purpose* (New York, 1989), p. 2.

³ Warren Christopher, 'Democracy and Human Rights: where America stands', address at the World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, 14 June 1993.

⁴ Charles Kegley and Eugene Wittkopf, *American Foreign Policy: patterns and process* (London, 1987), p. 255.

⁵ This concept is similar to World Bank claims to deal with 'technical' rather than 'political' issues. See David Williams and Tom Young, 'Governance, the World Bank and Liberal Theory', in *Political Studies* (Oxford), 42, 1, March 1994, p. 93.

⁶ Weigel, op. cit. p. 3.

⁷ Paul Dobrainsky, 'Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy', in *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 1989, p. 155.

policy? The most important point here is the high ideological content, especially in comparison with Europe's more openly Machiavellian approach to policy-making and justifications for intervention abroad. As David Cingranelli claims, 'foreign policy behaviour flow[s] naturally from some basic ethical and moral choices'.⁸ Moral justification has, in fact, been vital in sustaining support for foreign policy. There continues to be validity in the verdict reached by Michael Vlahos in 1988: 'Where America has intervened abroad, such actions have been politically satisfying only to the extent that they perpetuated the national myth.'⁹

There is a danger here in overstating the rôle of morality and ideology in policy-making, since as pointed out by Charles Kegley and Eugene Wittkopf, 'The tradition of American foreign policy encompasses both moral idealism and raw self interest'.¹⁰ Arthur Schlesinger Jr. argues that 'National interests in the end must set limits on messianic passions'.¹¹ Many politicians and observers have called for a more rational and less ideological approach to foreign policy based on interests as well as ideals and values, not least as regards the developing world. One example is Michael Clough: 'To succeed, a new U.S. policy must be based on a hard-headed assessment of American interests and African realities'.¹² Although such interests may not be well defined, and often come into conflict with each other or with particular moral values, they are at the heart of contemporary politics.

However, the 'realists' have not been able completely to avoid the moral language either. According to David Cullen, 'Whatever the practitioners of realpolitik might wish, a strong and bright moral component is essential to American foreign policy; without it, public support for foreign engagement tends rapidly to erode'.¹³ Sceptically, some believe realism merely 'sanctions the harnessing of humanitarian ideals and agencies to other, more hard-hearted governmental objectives'.¹⁴ Obviously, interests and morality both play a rôle in policy-making. Differences occur only in degree and relative im-

⁸ David Cingranelli, *Ethics, American Foreign Policy, and the Third World* (New York, 1993), p. viii.

⁹ Michael Vlahos, 'The End of America's Postwar Ethos', in *Foreign Affairs*, 66, 5, Summer 1988, p. 1095.

¹⁰ Kegley and Wittkopf, *op. cit.* p. 78.

¹¹ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., 'Foreign Policy and the American Character', in *Foreign Affairs*, 62, Fall 1983, p. 8.

¹² Michael Clough, *Free at Last? U.S. Policy Toward Africa and the End of the Cold War* (New York, Council on Foreign Relations, 1992), p. 4.

¹³ David Cullen, 'Human Rights Quandary', in *Foreign Affairs*, 72, 5, Winter 1992-3, p. 80.

¹⁴ Rogers Smith, 'Morality, Humanitarianism, and Foreign Policy: a purposive view', in Bruce Nichols and Gil Loescher (eds.), *The Moral Nation: humanitarianism and foreign policy today* (Notre Dame, IN, 1989), p. 41.

portance, as when arch-realist Henry Kissinger speaks of American 'commitment to values',¹⁵ and Richard Gardner defensively states, 'liberal internationalism has never meant utopian universalism... on the contrary it requires the prudent and selective exercise of military and economic power where the benefits outweigh the costs'.¹⁶

History has shown how competing ideologies have affected America's willingness to intervene abroad. The political tradition leaning towards isolationism is exemplified by John Quincy Adams: America 'goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.'¹⁷ In contrast, the more recent tradition has been based on Woodrow Wilson's 'universal moral objective' to 'make the world safe for democracy'.¹⁸ This view insists 'that a commitment to liberal democratic internationalism further[s] vital American interests'.¹⁹ Remnants of this debate were visible in 1992 with the 'America First' campaign of Patrick Buchanan being directed against the more active internationalism of George Bush and Bill Clinton.

The propensity of Americans towards universalising their own experience and values, combined with their nation's unchallenged global military, economic, and cultural influence, has led to the emergence of a pro-democratisation strategy, especially in Africa. Schlesinger writes of the 'historic tension in the American soul between an addiction to experiment and a susceptibility to ideology'.²⁰ Pushing democracy abroad may satisfy that tension with an unprecedented opportunity after the cold war. Secretary of State Christopher has publicly stated that 'promoting democracy and human rights is a pillar of American foreign policy',²¹ and George Moose, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, believes that 'we would be betraying our heritage' by not supporting democracy in the continent.²² In trying to justify these positions, both invoke moral universalism: Christopher calls democracy the 'moral and strategic imperative of the 1990s',²³ and Moose claims that 'the yearning for democracy is universal'.²⁴

¹⁵ Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1977 edn.), p. 197.

¹⁶ Richard Gardner, 'The Comeback of Liberal Internationalism', in Brad Roberts (ed.), *U.S. Foreign Policy After the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), p. 352.

¹⁷ Quoted in May, loc. cit. p. 136.

¹⁸ Kissinger, op. cit. p. 201.

¹⁹ Tony Smith, 'Making the World Safe for Democracy', in *The Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 1993, pp. 198-9.

²⁰ Schlesinger, loc. cit. p. 1.

²¹ Warren Christopher, 'A New Relationship', in *Africa Report* (New York), July-August 1993, p. 37.

²² George Moose, address at African-American Institute, Washington, DC, 19 May 1993.

²³ Christopher, 'Democracy and Human Rights', op. cit.

²⁴ Moose, op. cit.

Anthony Lake, Clinton's National Security Adviser, explained the US Administration's position in May 1993:

Democracy means more than elections. As we have sadly witnessed in Angola, elections are not enough, in themselves, to bring peace and justice. Genuine democracy implies more, such as respect for individual and minority rights, and tolerance for a loyal opposition. These traditions are not well established in some parts of Africa. Yet Africa's substantial movement toward democracy suggests these concepts and institutions can ultimately be universal.²⁵

But is America really prepared to undertake a social engineering project so large as restructuring other nations and their cultural traits in order to match a desired liberal political order?²⁶ For reasons relating to history and particular American idealism, the advocacy of some form of democracy is part of US foreign policy. But this agenda has to be placed within the proper context. How has the end of the cold war upset the traditional political balance within Washington? What are the forces behind the democracy drive? For reasons which will become clear, these questions are especially pertinent for US policy in Africa.

The implosion of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the United States as the sole global superpower has forced policy-makers to reshuffle the cards. There is unanimity among observers that before 1989, cold war considerations trumped all other potential interests or goals. Policy towards Africa shows this clearly. John F. Kennedy, who was sympathetic towards anti-colonial forces in the Portuguese colonies, was unable to support them actively because of US concern for a strategic North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) base in the Azores. Similarly, despite the moral indignation against South African *apartheid*, Reagan could not bring himself overtly to confront Pretoria for fears of gains by the Soviet Union in the region. Now that the military and ideological bogeyman is gone, the guidelines have disappeared and no new rules are yet established.

The former list of national interests that dictated policy towards Africa included (i) containing communism (now no longer deemed a threat), (ii) protecting shipping lanes (now not in danger, even by a

²⁵ Anthony Lake, 'National Security Advisor Outlines U.S. Africa Policy', address at Brookings Institute, Washington, DC, 3 May 1993.

²⁶ See Richard Jeffries, 'The State, Structural Adjustment and Good Government', in *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* (London), 31, 1, March 1993, p. 31, for similar criticisms of the World Bank for moving towards 'remodelling African societies to a greater extent than the remodelling of the familiar Western institutions'.

potentially hostile African régime), (iii) maintaining access to minerals, and (iv) promoting American values, notably human rights. Harry Johnston, once chairman of the House Sub-Committee on African Affairs, may speak of the 'critical interdependence between the U.S. and Africa',²⁷ but the mineral dependence argument has fallen by the wayside. In sum, the post-cold war era 'no longer provides policy-makers with a framework for deciding which African events are important'.²⁸

The dilemma is twofold. As explained by Clough, on the one hand, 'in the eyes of most Americans the world is no longer menacing – messy, bloody, and sometimes shockingly brutal, yes, but a threat to our security and peace, no'. On the other, 'the globalization of American society has made the idea of national interests more elusive'.²⁹ This has left Africa policy in somewhat of a limbo, sending out conflicting and confusing signals. Peter Schraeder claims that 'there exists no consensus within the policymaking establishment over Africa's importance to US national security interests',³⁰ and Marguerite Michaels believes that 'the implosion of the Soviet Union set America free to pursue its own interests in Africa – and it found it did not have any'.³¹ This seems, at least partly, true. Instead of actual interests, the US can only list over-arching global aims:

rapid population growth, environmental degradation, nuclear proliferation, mass migrations, failed states, health concerns like the AIDS/HIV epidemic, and lack of broad-based economic development are the new international threats to this nation.³²

Certainly these are important international issues and should be addressed by the United States, but they are a long way from the narrowly defined national concerns of the past. According to Robert Rotberg, 'This lengthy and incomplete list...is an agenda of quiet desperation',³³ while Clough points out that as national interests have

²⁷ Harry Johnston, Chairman of House Sub-Committee on African Affairs, address to seminar, 'U.S. Foreign Policy: an African agenda', Washington, DC, 5 March 1993.

²⁸ Clough, *op. cit.* p. 55.

²⁹ Michael Clough, 'Grass-Roots Policymaking', in *Foreign Affairs*, 73, 1, January–February 1994, pp. 2 and 4.

³⁰ Peter J. Schraeder, *United States Foreign Policy Toward Africa: incrementalism, crisis and change* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 2–3.

³¹ Marguerite Michaels, 'Retreat from Africa', in *Foreign Affairs*, 72, 1, 1992–3, p. 94.

³² John F. Hicks, Assistant Administrator, Bureau for Africa, Agency for International Development, statement before the Sub-Committee for Africa, Committee on Foreign Affairs, US House of Representatives, Washington, DC, 24 February 1994, p. 2.

³³ Robert Rotberg, 'The Clinton Administration and Africa', in *Current History* (Philadelphia), 92, 574, May 1993, p. 1.

become uncertain or ill-defined, policy-making is more sensitive to domestic interest groups, and decisions are moved down the bureaucratic ladder.³⁴ As David Wiley concluded in 1991, 'There is almost complete uniformity of the views between academic Africanists and government officials dealing with Africa that the government's policy concern about Africa is low and drifting lower.'³⁵

MARGINALISATION OF AFRICA

The absence of clear US interests has left Africa at the bottom of foreign policy concerns. The Department of Defence admitted in 1988 that it has 'no major military goals in Africa'.³⁶ The nature of the on-going wars in the continent, which are usually 'low-intensity' and internal, does not imply pervasive American military interest. US enthusiasm for peacekeeping operations has also been tempered. In 1994, spurred by the results in Somalia, Clinton issued Directive 25, which severely restricts any future American rôle in 'international' operations.³⁷

In uncharacteristically frank remarks, a senior Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) official stated that recent cutbacks were necessary because 'We have never been in Africa to report on Africa. We went into Africa as part of the covert activity of the Cold War'. He went on to note, in an enlightening aside, that 'the covert operations people themselves wanted to withdraw from some African countries rather than remaining and just reporting on local activities'.³⁸ The State Department's Africa Bureau has recently closed consulates in Cameroon, Comoros, Nigeria, and Kenya, and the Congressional Sub-Committees on Africa have been under constant threat of dissolution or merger into another regional grouping.³⁹

³⁴ Clough, *op. cit.* p. 14.

³⁵ David Wiley, 'Academic Analysis and U.S. Policymaking on Africa: reflections and conclusions', in *Issue: quarterly journal of opinion* (Los Angeles), 19, 2, 1991, p. 45.

³⁶ James Woods in Helen Kitchen, *Some Guidelines on Africa for the Next President* (Washington, DC, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 1988), p. 31.

³⁷ See Douglas Jehl, 'Rwanda Stand Reflects New U.S. Caution', in *International Herald Tribune* (Paris), 19 May 1994, p. 4.

³⁸ Walter Pincus, 'CIA Proposal to Cut Back in Africa is Drawing Fire', in *ibid.* 24 June 1994, p. 1. For a contrary view, see Valerie Hudson, Robert Ford, and David Pack with Eric Giordano, 'Why the Third World Matters, Why Europe Probably Won't: the geoeconomics of circumscribed engagement', in *Journal of Strategic Studies* (London), 14, 3, September 1991, pp. 255-98.

³⁹ See Steven Greenhouse, 'U.S. Conference on Africa Under Fire', in *International Herald Tribune*, 28 June 1994, p. 3, for further reflections of low-level political and diplomatic interest.

US investment in sub-Saharan Africa is about one-third of that for Brazil alone – a perhaps not surprising fact, given that the entire GNP of the region (600 million people) is equal to that of Belgium (10 million people). As Clough has recently reminded us, ‘By whatever measure one uses... American economic interests in Africa are marginal’.⁴⁰ Even the relatively heavily Africa-invested French take a similar view, judging from what one French diplomat wrote in *Le Monde* in 1990: ‘Economically speaking, if the entire black Africa, with the exception of South Africa, were to disappear in a flood, the global cataclysm will be exactly non-existent’.⁴¹ As for the continent’s impact on US policy-makers, Carol Lancaster concludes that ‘Sub-Saharan Africa is seen less and less as a credible or useful economic and diplomatic partner and increasingly as a humanitarian problem to the world.’⁴²

1. *Africa Policy Becomes Victim to Bureaucratic Politics*

The American system of government means that it is often essential for a coherent policy to have a powerful figure orchestrating the many relevant components of the Administration. Due to its low priority, Africa policy has been left without such a leader, and thus has a less co-ordinated decision-making process. A decentralised bureaucracy has led to a fragmented policy unable to articulate clear goals and interests, especially in the post-cold war era. As Roger Hilsman noted, as long ago as 1969, ‘Very often policy is the sum of a congeries of separate or only vaguely related actions.’⁴³

The bureaucratic ‘cells’ that deal with Africa policy are to be found in a variety of US Departments, notably State, Defence, Commerce, and Treasury, in each of which there are key sub-divisions that complicate the process. The State Department is a virtual labyrinth, including the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the US Information Agency (USIA), and at least seven different Bureaux – (i) African Affairs, (ii) International Organisation Affairs, (iii) Democracy/Human Rights/Labour, (iv) Population, Refugees,

⁴⁰ Clough, loc. cit. p. 15.

⁴¹ Victor Chesnault, ‘Que faire de l’Afrique noire?’, in *Le Monde* (Paris), 28 February 1990, p. 2, quoted by Michael Chege, ‘Remembering Africa’, in *Foreign Affairs*, 71, 1, 1991–2, p. 148.

⁴² Carol Lancaster, *The U.S. and Africa: into the twenty-first century* (Washington, DC, Overseas Development Council, 1993), p. 19.

⁴³ Roger Hilsman, ‘Policymaking is Politics’, in James Rosenau (ed.), *International Politics and Foreign Policy: a reader in research and theory* (New York, 1969), p. 233.

and Migration, (v) Intelligence and Research, (vi) Economic and Business Affairs, and (vii) the Policy Planning Staff – that all deal with African issues. A single US embassy abroad may have representatives from both the State and Defence Departments, as well as the CIA, USAID, and USIA, all pursuing their own strategies.

Communication between agencies and policy co-ordination is irregular and inconsistent, often determined by personal relationships and rivalry as they battle for funds, the President's ear, and power. Apart from some well-publicised splits between State Department 'doves' and CIA's 'hawks' (for example, over what to do in Angola), there are often continuing differences, and sometimes conflicts, between State and Commerce (human rights versus trade) or Commerce and USAID (differing views on foreign aid and economic policy). The bureaucratic structure often fosters a sense of competition and antagonism rather than coherence and co-operation.

The agencies are further hampered by a number of institutional shortcomings. The State Department often finds itself with few senior officials that have any direct African expertise and suffers from heavy turnover. The lack of a colonial history in Africa has led to what Helen Kitchen calls a 'weakness in institutional memory'. As an example, she points to the fact that by the third year of Jimmy Carter's Administration, 'no officer serving in the State Department's Office of Southern African Affairs had prior experience in the country or countries for which he was responsible'.⁴⁴ According to David Wiley, the trend towards the continent's marginalisation has led 'ambitious U.S. foreign service and aid officials [to] increasingly view Africa as a "policy backwater" where no-growth budgets in a low priority arena translate into poor career advancement opportunities'.⁴⁵ Clough believes that 'officials who have responsibility for African affairs in various executive branch departments' have helped to marginalise themselves through the predictability of their views – for example, they 'regularly advocate expanding the official presence of the United States on the continent'. This means 'that senior officials – and the foreign policy Establishment more generally – are often skeptical of arguments made by government specialists on Africa'.⁴⁶

The combination of the end of the cold war and the marginalisation of Africa has shifted policy decision-making away from powerful centres in the Pentagon and the White House. Those working on

⁴⁴ Helen Kitchen, *U.S. Interests in Africa* (New York, 1983), pp. 3–4.

⁴⁵ Wiley, loc. cit. p. 40.

⁴⁶ Clough, op. cit. pp. 43–4.

African issues at lower levels are unable to clarify or direct policy because of fragmentation, lack of co-ordination, institutional weakness, and bureaucratic inertia. Without a policy rudder, the way has been opened for more ideological considerations to take hold, and for outsiders to influence heavily plans and programmes by pressing their own agendas.

2. *The Emergence of Powerful Domestic Constituencies*

A creative or dynamic African policy was precluded in the past not only by cold war considerations, but also by domestic factors that continue to leave the often divided Africanist community with a weak voice in Washington. A survey of members of the African Studies Association in 1990 revealed that 68 per cent of respondents agreed that 'access of Africanists to the U.S. policymaking process is limited to a small group of insiders'.⁴⁷ Indeed, in the past, a 'near-monolithic hostility' towards official US policy meant that some scholars 'found themselves increasingly out of place at Africanist gatherings'.⁴⁸ In addition, many Africanists have become associated with specific ideological positions and are not considered as giving 'objective' advice. Many have openly embraced policies that eventually failed miserably – such as *ujamaa* in Tanzania, Frelimo development strategies in Mozambique, or touting Jonas Savimbi in Angola as an exemplary African 'democrat' – which made them later appear naïve and thus easy to ignore.⁴⁹

The influence of African-Americans on foreign policy continues to be quite low considering the community's significant size. This can be attributed to a variety of factors, including their relatively poor economic status, the domestic focus of their politics, and a general lack of interest beyond the élite.⁵⁰ In practice, their leaders have produced no new agenda for US policy, other than vague calls for more aid and more involvement.⁵¹ As with other lobbyists, they tend to universalise the American experience and talk of 'extending the Civil Rights movement' to Africa.⁵² They usually do not profess a non-western

⁴⁷ Michael Bratton et al., 'How Africanists View U.S. Africa Policy: results of a survey', in *Issue*, Fall 1991. ⁴⁸ Clough, op. cit. p. 29. ⁴⁹ Ibid. pp. 23–4.

⁵⁰ Milton Morris, 'African-Americans and the New World Order', in *The Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 1992, p. 5. ⁵¹ Johnston, op. cit.

⁵² Morris, loc. cit. p. 12. Also, there are certain questions that need to be raised about the effects of the patronising exoticism, excessive commercialism, and ungrounded idealism that frame Africa's image in America. Ideas about Africa are usually bound up in such cultural icons as music, clothes, and names, and rarely go beyond such relatively superficial levels to discuss the

approach, but essentially call for the more vigorous promotion of liberal American values.⁵³ Their strong support for the anti-*apartheid* movement was mainly framed in terms of opposing white racism and supporting civil rights.⁵⁴

Current global political and ideological realities have opened the way for new issues and pressures to emerge. The foreign policy-making process has been thoroughly penetrated. With the cold war over, 'the ability of relief agencies, human rights organizations, and environmental groups to influence the U.S. foreign policy agenda has been enhanced'.⁵⁵ According to Christopher, domestic and external issues are now inseparable: 'The American public expects our foreign policy investments to pay dividends in economic growth and the advancement of democratic ideals.'⁵⁶ The rise of powerful non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the Administration's increasing use of them in the implementation of policy has reflected this, notably in the disbursement of aid. As for the decentralisation of power-centres away from the traditional east coast establishment, Clough calls this 'the prairie fire of independent global policymaking that is raging across the country'.⁵⁷

As technology improves, the media are becoming more important as a source of information for voters and interest groups, as well as politicians and policy-makers. On the one hand, there is a tendency to oversimplify complex events and to reinforce certain stereotypes that are misleading to the public and unhelpful for shaping an effective policy. On the other hand, issues are publicised that would otherwise go unnoticed. Herein lies the potential problem: as the media become more influential, editors and journalists become gatekeepers of the information and may indirectly, or even purposefully, control policy. James Schlesinger writes:

National policy is determined by the plight of the Kurds or the starvation in Somalia, as it appears on the screen. 'If a tree falls in the forest' – or a catastrophe occurs, but is unrecorded on tape – it is unseen. Starvation

deeper meanings and values of another culture, such as philosophy, authority, or conceptions of self and community. Current American multiculturalism is much more about consumption than understanding.

⁵³ The Congressional Black Caucus led calls during 1994 for military intervention to implant democracy by force in Haiti.

⁵⁴ Clough, *op. cit.* p. 35, raises a further question: 'Implicitly, the argument that African-Americans have a greater claim on policy toward Africa than other people suggests that they have a lesser claim on policy toward other parts of the world.'

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 38.

⁵⁶ Warren Christopher, 'Foreign Assistance Priorities After the Cold War', in *US Department of State Dispatch* (Washington, DC), 4, 22, 31 May 1993, p. 393.

⁵⁷ Clough, *loc. cit.* p. 7.

continues in the Sudan or Mozambique...but it is Somalia or Bosnia that draws the attention because the cameras are there.⁵⁸

The ability of television – and, to a lesser extent, radio, newspapers, and journals – to influence governmental reactions was shown in a 1994 policy statement to Congress. A USAID official defended disproportionate funding on elections because the ‘international media has focused almost exclusively on elections’.⁵⁹ This is a particularly worrisome trend for an effective US Africa policy because images are overriding facts and, ‘Unfortunately, American perceptions of the African continent are shallow and highly skewed’.⁶⁰

DEMOCRATISATION IN AFRICA AS A GOAL FOR US POLICY

While the final result of the ‘new world order’ is far from clear, what has emerged is a general pattern of US policy goals, with still somewhat of a hierarchy. As during the cold war, strategic security interests remain the top priority – that is undebatable. Beyond that, economic interests and the pursuit of American values abroad – such as human rights and democratisation – are battling for dominance.

This is not to suggest that there is a simple dichotomy between economic interests and democracy objectives. The recent decision to de-link human rights from China’s trade status can be interpreted as Washington’s belated recognition of its limited influence in internal Chinese politics, or as an alternative strategy for pushing US values by encouraging a strong domestic middle-class. The Clinton Administration has accepted this argument for Asia policy, but not for Africa.⁶¹ The reasons for this inconsistency lie with the particular interests driving regional policy. Whereas the cold war blanketed the entire globe with strategic considerations, now these dominate policy in only specific areas, such as the Middle East or the Korean peninsula. Attempts by human rights groups in the past to influence US actions in Africa have been limited, but now their concerns have emerged as key issues where strategic interests are no longer vital; for example in Malawi, Kenya, and Zaïre.⁶²

⁵⁸ James Schlesinger, ‘Quest for a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy’, in *Foreign Affairs*, 71, 1, 1992–3, p. 18. ⁵⁹ Hicks, op. cit. p. 8. ⁶⁰ Clough, op. cit. p. 20.

⁶¹ See Paul Blustein and Thomas Lippmann, ‘Clinton Says Trade Boosts Rights Issue’, in *The Washington Post*, 15 November 1994.

⁶² Without their former rôle as anti-communist bulwarks, Daniel arap Moi and Mobutu Sese Seko have had to redefine their utility to the West. Their cooperation during the humanitarian crises in Somalia and Rwanda have effectively, if temporarily, served that purpose and tempered US pressures.

Whereas Asia policy is principally guided by economic factors, due to significant domestic pressures for favourable business relations with the region,⁶³ Africa policy is to a great extent now being determined by special interests with liberalising agendas that have become aware of new opportunities for their external implementation, and by a Congress which is highly susceptible to an uninformed and media-influenced public.

1. *Democratisation as a Means to an End*

Most debates on democratisation in Africa have focused on the 'how?', but it seems more appropriate to examine the 'why?'. However, one distinction must be first addressed: is democracy a means to an end or an end in itself? There is some evidence that the most prosperous western societies have been democratic, and that they have recently had the most competent and accountable political leaders. But to assume a causal relationship between these favourable outcomes and democracy is misleading because it ignores the cultural and historical factors that led to the current state of affairs.

Tony Smith explains that 'the consolidation of democracy abroad [is] seen as a means to secure stable governments friendly to the United States in a manner that would directly increase American national security'.⁶⁴ Paul Dobriansky, who served in the State Department under Reagan, believes that 'a world of democracy engenders an international environment most conducive to U.S. political, economic and cultural interests'.⁶⁵ But such statements are based on an assumption that people would naturally be pro-American if only their disliked governments would allow them, as well as an unquestioned belief that the world aspires to be liberal, and that American values represent a universal good. On-going developments in Algeria should be a warning to US policy-makers that elections do not always produce pro-western liberal régimes. An anti-western nationalist reaction in Africa seems a strong possibility if conditions continue to decline. As Smith reminds us, 'The populist passions of democracy are well known and dangerous.'⁶⁶

Many in the US Administration, and elsewhere for that matter, believe that liberal values and democratic features – especially trans-

⁶³ See Thomas Lippmann, 'Asian Nations Often Defy U.S. Wishes', in *The Washington Post*, 15 November 1994.

⁶⁴ Smith, loc. cit. p. 202.

⁶⁵ Dobriansky, loc. cit. p. 166.

⁶⁶ Smith, loc. cit. p. 203.

parency, accountability, and the rule of law – are essential to economic development.⁶⁷ The connection in Washington is sufficiently embedded and muddled for George Moose to claim that economic management and human rights ‘are increasingly difficult to separate’,⁶⁸ despite plenty of evidence to the contrary.

First of all, the régimes of some of the most robust economies in the world are neither transparent nor accountable. According to John Healey and Mark Robinson, ‘there can be no assurance that political liberalisation or multi-party democracy will also ensure better economic management’.⁶⁹ Indeed, if history has any lessons here, it is that certain developmental processes must precede democratisation,⁷⁰ and recent comparisons between liberalisation in Russia and China may bear this out.⁷¹ Secondly, the move to elect presidents and national assemblies cannot be seen isolated from other policy objectives, such as the continuing wave of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). There is little reason to assume that, given the choice, people will vote for the difficult sacrifices inherent in economic reform. The precarious situation of President Frederick Chiluba of Zambia is but one illustration of the fact that good intentions may not be enough to ensure political stability and continuing popular support.⁷²

There is a danger in US assumptions that democratic states are likely to be stable and pro-West, and little evidence to prove that they manage their economies better than authoritarian régimes. Indeed, there is the strong possibility that external pressures for multi-party competitive elections may inhibit the implementation of the SAPs currently being encouraged by the Washington-based international financial institutions. These conflicting goals may cancel each other out, and both reform movements may fail. In short, the argument that democracy should be encouraged in Africa as a means to securing

⁶⁷ See World Bank, *Governance and Development* (Washington, DC, 1992). There remains an unresolved paradox: the desire for accountable and responsive government as well as autonomous technocrats isolated from special political interests.

⁶⁸ George Moose, interview with Margaret Novicki, in *Africa Report*, January–February 1994, p. 24.

⁶⁹ John Healey and Mark Robinson, *Democracy, Governance, and Economic Policy* (London, Overseas Development Institute, 1992), p. 157.

⁷⁰ Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: lord and peasant in the making of the modern world* (London, 1967 edn.), argues that certain historical processes need to develop, notably the emergence of a large middle-class, in order to sustain a viable democratic state.

⁷¹ See Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, ‘Economic Adjustment and the Prospects for Democracy’, in Haggard and Kaufman (eds.), *The Politics of Economic Adjustment* (Princeton, 1992), pp. 319–50.

⁷² There are very definite limits as to how far political legitimacy can be correlated to economic performance since other factors such as ethnicity, patron–client relationships, or nationalism can be more relevant.

political stability and economic prosperity is ungrounded and based on numerous false assumptions.

2. *Democratisation as an End in Itself*

Is democracy a universal good and/or natural aspiration for all humanity? Edmund Burke claimed that 'Nothing universal can be rationally affirmed on any moral or political subject'.⁷³ Samuel Huntington goes one step further: 'The very notion that there could be a "universal civilization" is a western idea, directly at odds with the particularism of most Asian societies and their emphasis on what distinguishes one people from another.'⁷⁴

Western culture is certainly the most dominant and pervasive on earth, but its basic tenets are not universal truths. As David Williams and Tom Young have pointed out, 'the liberal self is a product of particular historical circumstances', which 'far from lying dormant, universally waiting emancipation from sinister oppression, is in fact a construct of recent and Western provenance'.⁷⁵ Huntington expands:

The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear. They are far more fundamental than differences among political ideologies and political régimes.⁷⁶

If there is no universal moral code, then certainly there can be no universal political structure. 'People's collective identity may take many political forms',⁷⁷ and liberal democracy cannot work in societies where the moral roots and cultural norms are so different. Charles Taylor believes that 'freedom and individual diversity can only flourish in a society where there is a general recognition of their worth'.⁷⁸

Modern western democracies cannot be seen in an historical vacuum, but rather must be viewed in light of the particular evolution of European society and philosophy. 'Democracy has', George Keenan observes, 'a relatively narrow base both in time and space; and the evidence has yet to be produced that it is the natural form of rule for

⁷³ Quoted in Cingranelli, *op. cit.* p. 8.

⁷⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?', in *Foreign Affairs*, 72, 3, Summer 1993, p. 41.

⁷⁵ Williams and Young, *loc. cit.* p. 97.

⁷⁶ Huntington, *loc. cit.* p. 25.

⁷⁷ Smith, *loc. cit.* p. 204.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (Oxford, 1989), p. 82.

people outside those narrow perimeters'.⁷⁹ The former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Herman Cohen, emphasised that African states had to find their own political paths: 'While the United States favors a multi-party system, who are we to say it is good for everybody?'.⁸⁰ However, US hypocrisy is often at its most blatant when 'pushing American values' in the same breath as 'respecting other cultures'.⁸¹

The inconsistency of US pressures for democracy and human rights also contradicts any assertions of universality. There can be no credible claims to the moral high ground if policy is selectively applied. In the past, the US has only favoured democracy when it suited other interests. American activities to undermine the popularly elected Salvador Allende in Chile are an example.⁸² Lancaster believes one 'reason the United States should actively support the expansion and consolidation of democracy in Africa is that our words and our actions can make a difference there'.⁸³ In a similar vein, Wiley suggests that to offset gloom about the continent's prospects, academics should emphasise 'that Africa provides immense opportunity for the advancement of American democratic values'.⁸⁴ The danger is that such reasoning invites external experimentation and tinkering with African political systems, without any true responsibility or ability to enforce what is being advocated. Angola is a tragic example.

There is little reason or historical precedent to conclude that democracy can be successfully exported by the United States. Even if it had the necessary will 'to push democracy' on Africa, Smith points out that rarely 'can outside actors be more than marginally effective in determining political outcomes'.⁸⁵ According to David Hendrickson, 'Both the President and Congress appear unwilling to offer the resources necessary to assist the reconstruction of these economies and thus undergird their experiments in freedom'.⁸⁶ Certainly external donors cannot provide the needed political solutions to the complex problems facing so many developing states. From 1962 to 1988 the

⁷⁹ George Keenan, quoted in Smith, loc. cit. p. 200.

⁸⁰ Herman Cohen, quoted in Schraeder, op. cit. p. 257.

⁸¹ In 'The Seedlings of Hope', US State Department, Washington, DC, June 1989, the US Ambassador to South Africa, Edward J. Perkins, spoke of US goals in promoting democracy, pluralism, and the free market, and in the next paragraph of 'respect for African aspirations'.

⁸² Noam Chomsky, *Human Rights and Foreign Policy* (Nottingham, 1978), p. 9, claims that the US 'is no more engaged in programs of intellectual good than any other state has been'.

⁸³ Lancaster, op. cit. p. 49.

⁸⁵ Smith, loc. cit. p. 208.

⁸⁴ Wiley, loc. cit. p. 46.

⁸⁶ David Hendrickson, 'The Renovation of American Foreign Policy', in *Foreign Affairs*, 71, 2, Spring 1992, p. 59.

leading African recipients of American aid were Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, the Sudan, and Zaïre. This list hardly implies a positive correlation between aid and democratisation, but rather suggests that American involvement was actually an impediment to that process. The US is not now, nor has ever been, the dominant economic force in the continent, and in the end must acknowledge that 'its power is far too limited to be able to promote democracy in many parts of the world where the domestic forces in favor of it are lacking'.⁸⁷

Finally, it is not appropriate for any *single* nation-state – and that includes America, despite its strong candidacy – to promote universal values, even if these did exist and could be agreed upon. Debates in the United Nations and recent Asian assertiveness show that this is slowly being recognised.

AFRICAN REALITIES AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY

At the heart of American misconceptions of the realities in Africa and the weakness of democratisation goals is a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature and key features of African political authority. There seems to be a refusal by the West to acknowledge that 'civil society' may exist in a form that is not necessarily either 'modern' or 'liberal'. Far too often Americans emphasise that the growth of western plural units should be promoted without realising that a vibrant 'civil society' already exists in a number of African states, albeit often based on other relationships or identities, notably family, clan, and ethnicity.

Kissinger asks, 'does the United States really know enough about the workings of democracy in distant societies and cultures?'⁸⁸ Clearly not. George Moose, the highest ranking official for Africa policy, claimed recently that 'Democracy in Africa is important to the U.S. because only democratic governments that reflect the will of their citizens can act legitimately and authoritatively on their behalf.'⁸⁹ This is a narrow western liberal interpretation of the derivation of political legitimacy and authority. Despite the façade of the African state, alternative power structures continue to exist, and their legitimacy is rarely based on 'democracy'.⁹⁰ For different regions such a basis is different, albeit

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 211.

⁸⁸ Henry Kissinger, 'Foreign Policy is About National Interest', in *International Herald Tribune*, 25 October 1993.

⁸⁹ Moose, op. cit.

⁹⁰ Historical examples of democratic features in African political systems have been given considerable significance by some authors, including Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the curse of the nation-state* (London, 1992), pp. 62–73. However, they represent the exception and are certainly divorced from current trends.

often provided through familial or patron–client relationships. Michael Schatzburg argues that African conceptions of power and political legitimacy are different from the contemporary western model, and cannot be separated from their cultural context.⁹¹

There are those who like Lancaster believe that although any democratic system of government must include regular elections, each country should be left to determine such important details as ‘whether the legislature is bicameral or unicameral’, or ‘whether an upper house is elected or made up of appointed traditional chiefs or others’.⁹² But what if the society has a single assembly with appointed chiefs? Would that fit the prescribed conditions for democracy? The fundamental point is that competitive elections may not be a necessary component in establishing political legitimacy.

The excessive emphasis on elections also shows false assumptions based on western experience, rather than what actually happens in Africa. The ‘rational choice’ voting model is weak in the US (few would dispute that images have become more important than substance), much less in non-western societies. Especially in Africa, the symbolism and significance of voting can take many forms. In Angola and Mozambique, for example, the elections were meant to be a conflict resolution mechanism, whereas in South Africa they were a validation of citizenship, a unifying event of inclusion and, most importantly, an exercise in the restoration of dignity.⁹³ The ‘turf’ battles in Natal and in the townships of Pretoria–Witwatersrand–Vereeniging (PWV) demonstrated that the elections were hardly about rational choices. Many African National Congress (ANC) or *Inkatha* ‘areas’, especially in Natal where ethnicity is homogeneously Zulu, had more to do with allegiances of the local strongman and tactics of survival. According to Tom Young, ‘Little of the evidence... suggests that policy has been an issue in these elections’.⁹⁴ As Lancaster felt obliged to admit in 1993, many in the continent are likely ‘to base their votes on cues from village “big men” or ethnic brokers rather than government’s performance’.⁹⁵ Alas, elections do not a liberal make.

When confronted with the local and not-necessarily democratic nature of political authority in Africa, the US Government is not

⁹¹ Michael Schatzberg, ‘Power, Legitimacy and Democratisation in Africa’, in *Africa* (London), 63, 4, 1993, pp. 445–61. ⁹² See, for example, Lancaster, op. cit. p. 51.

⁹³ See Martin Meredith, *South Africa’s New Era: the 1994 election* (London, 1994), p. 2, ‘Time and time again, voters leaving polling stations spoke of how their dignity had been restored.’

⁹⁴ Tom Young, ‘Elections and Electoral Politics in Africa’, in *Africa*, 63, 3, 1993, p. 306.

⁹⁵ Lancaster, op. cit. p. 29.

geared to deal well with such structures. Its inability to come to terms with Somali clans and the absurd assignment of the military to 'nation-building' are recent examples. The increased use of NGOs in dealing with Africa may be a sign that planners are recognising this institutional weakness. Moose explains the lesson from Somalia:

What we haven't been able to crack, and indeed perhaps [we] set ourselves a very ambitious agenda in trying to deal with, is the whole issue of Somali society and Somali politics...one of the key lessons of this experience is, yes, there is a role and indeed a responsibility [for] the international community...but ultimately...there are things that no one can do for the indigenous people.⁹⁶

Huntington agrees that the West must 'develop a more profound understanding of the basic religious and philosophical assumptions underlying other civilizations and the ways in which people...see their interests'.⁹⁷

The economic, technological, and cultural forces of the West are sweeping across the globe, and there are good reasons for believing that democratisation should be seen as a product of this trend.⁹⁸ Young says 'There is no evidence that African élites have done other than take on board [liberal] assumptions at least as far as the public parts of their constitutional and institutional structures are concerned', and that they have bought the package with a 'wholly uncritical adoption of Western modernity'.⁹⁹ In Mozambique, for example, although the political leaders have recently adopted what might be described as a model democratic constitution, will those now elected to the National Assembly be able to prevent power throughout the countryside being based on coercive violence and superstition, as too often in the past?¹⁰⁰ In South Africa, although liberal phraseology may be used by most members of the Government of National Unity, there are others who have to deal with the everyday politics, not of rights and liberties, but of survival. Perhaps the ANC will be able to accommodate these two political traditions and languages, but the relationship between the top leadership and lower officials has already shown signs of potential rupture.

It is inevitable that in order to pay for élite lifestyles and middle-class demands for consumer goods, African societies must integrate themselves into the international capitalist economy, and as Goran Hyden

⁹⁶ Moose, interview with Novicki, loc. cit. p. 22.

⁹⁷ Huntington, loc. cit. p. 49.

⁹⁸ Smith, loc. cit. p. 205.

⁹⁹ Young, loc. cit. pp. 300-1.

¹⁰⁰ See Ken Wilson, 'Cults of Violence and Counter-Violence', in *Journal of Southern African Studies* (Oxford), 18, 3, September 1992, pp. 527-82.

shows, all sectors of society must be 'captured' in order to achieve 'development'.¹⁰¹ American cultural tastes are becoming increasingly popular in urban Africa, even among the poor. But significant differences remain and observers should not confuse music, clothes, or styles with more fundamental philosophical changes. The American weakness for style over substance should not permeate US foreign policy. Africa is surely going through the cultural pangs of westernisation, but that process must be recognised as a uniquely African evolution, and one that is bound to be slow and bumpy.¹⁰²

SOME CONCLUSIONS

America is a nation still characterised by a particular liberal philosophy and moral idealism. Indeed, to a certain extent the United States continues to be defined by a 'national myth', a strong component of which is an absolute faith in the universal good of American ideas, institutions, and way of life. Because of this conviction, the promotion of government by consent has, at least since World War I, been an important feature of US foreign policy. However, the end of the cold war has opened new doors for the 'democratisation agenda', and nowhere are these opportunities deemed greater than in Africa.

But due to a lack of concrete American interests – stemming from the continent's relative economic and strategic insignificance – Africa has been marginalised within the policy-making process. With no strong voice in the White House or other power centres, Africa policy has drifted without coherence or vision.

Efforts at exporting western institutions and values are likely to fail, at least in the short to medium term. Predictions that elected régimes will be stable and pro-America are ungrounded. Assumptions of the universal nature of liberalism and democratic political systems are clearly false. It is arrogant to believe that there is only one way of organising a society, and presumptuous to think that the US Government is capable of engineering a series of external transformations, not least because the nature and source of political legitimacy in Africa has been misunderstood. The optimism that bloomed in the 1990s over the on-going process of democratisation,

¹⁰¹ See Goran Hyden, *Beyond Umajaa in Tanzania: underdevelopment and an uncaptured peasantry* (London, Ibadan, and Nairobi, 1980).

¹⁰² African adaptations of European religions are often very visible examples. Christianity, while widely accepted, has maintained aspects of 'traditional' African imagery and practice. In the words of Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: the politics of the belly* (London and New York, 1993), p. 27, 'all borrowings are also acts of reappropriation and reinvention'.

culminating with South Africa's first non-racial elections, is premature. Most African societies contain too many authoritarian features and internal contradictions for liberal democracy to work well, if at all, this century.

Hence the crucial need for American policy-makers to recognise important weaknesses in their approach, which ought to be based on a more comprehensive understanding of African realities. Otherwise, in the words of Patrick Chabal, 'we run the risk of comforting ourselves once more in what will turn out to be only the latest delusion about Africa'.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Patrick Chabal, 'Interpreting Contemporary Black Africa', draft paper for Conference on 'Identity, Modernity, and Politics', School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 14–15 September 1994.